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# Politics and Ethics

A Contribution to the Discussion of  
**THE FREE SOCIETY**  
Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

ROBERT GORDIS

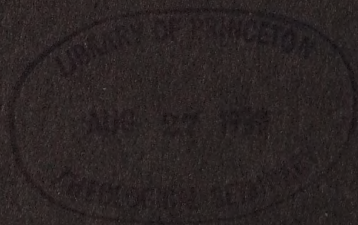
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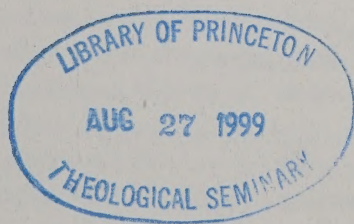
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# Politics and Ethics

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### The Two Spheres

The split between ethics and politics is essentially a modern phenomenon. It did not exist for Aristotle, for whom "Politics" and "Ethics" were two subdivisions of the same work. Nor would the ancient Hebrews have recognized any demarcation if the two concepts, for which they had no terms, had been made clear to them. In the modern post-Renaissance world, the subject has bifurcated into the two parallel concepts of an amoral politics and an unpolitical ethics.

Amoral politics takes several forms. There is the cynical theory of politics associated with Machiavelli, though his own teaching was far less extreme than the popular image conjured up by his name. Far more to the point is the widespread practical cynicism of modern politics, evident in municipal political machines, in national party conventions, and in the negotiations, if that be the word, of international relations, though the "men of affairs" involved in these enterprises are rarely concerned with finding a rationale for their conduct.

The basically amoral character of politics is affirmed not only by politicians but by religious and ethical thinkers as well. One or two examples may be adduced. The depth of Reinhold Niebuhr's insight into human nature, the sophistication of his analysis of the political process, and the extent of his religious and philosophic ideas are qualities which have set him above most of his contem-

poraries. Every effort to summarize his teaching briefly is exposed to the danger of distortion. Nonetheless, I believe that certain aspects of his teaching place him within this school of thought. His basic thesis of moral man in an immoral society, of men who will the good but are powerless to achieve it in the context of group-life, is a modern reinterpretation of Saint Paul's lament, "The good I would, I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do." (*Romans* 7:19) Niebuhr buttresses his approach by reflecting upon the ambiguous character of power as including the evils of coercion and self-interest. Since politics cannot function without power, politics must be inherently immoral, or at best an amoral instrument for achieving purposes that may be good, bad, or indifferent. Yet even these purposes, when basically good, are not free from the taint of aggression, violence, and self-seeking.

At the same time, Niebuhr's entire public activity, his political liberalism, and his lifelong concern with social justice are based on the assumption that somehow ethics must determine the character of politics. I believe that this contradiction between his theory and his practice flows out of the specific tradition in which he has been reared and is not inherent in the two enterprises of ethics and politics. It is my conviction that this inner conflict can and must be resolved if politics is to serve the highest needs of society. Niebuhr's magisterial influence has of course profoundly affected our age. There are many other religiously oriented political and social liberals who theoretically maintain the principle of the amorality of politics and then proceed to belie it by their own public activities.

The profundity and the sophistication of Niebuhr's reinterpretation of New Testament teaching in general and of Paulinian doctrine in particular are of course far removed from the unreflective piety and ethical attitudes of the generality of believers. Hence a more down-to-earth example of the widely held belief in religious circles of the inherently amoral character of politics should be cited.

The 1960 Presidential campaign offered a striking illustration of this attitude. In *The Christian Century* of August 17, 1960, Warren P. Martin published a paper, "Weak Christian, Strong President," arguing that an effective President must necessarily be one in

whom the Christian ethic beats faintly if at all. An editorial in the same issue attempted to refute this position by calling attention to Lincoln as a strong President and a deeply religious man. To this, Ronald Goetz responded in "An Eschatological Manifesto," *The Christian Century*, November 2, 1960:

. . . The editorial argues correctly that the great Lincoln was a religious man, but it fails to recognize that Lincoln's religion was closer to deism than to the New Testament; it did not begin in a personal experience of resurrection in and with a risen living Lord. He did not affirm the church and its evangelical mission to be the center of his life; in fact, he was not a church member. He led the nation into war in order to assert the authority of his government over a secessionist government, and though he was by inclination a peaceful and a merciful man, his war was a war of power. By Lincoln's own admission—as Martin indicates in his quoting of the man—he was willing to use the issue of slavery as a political tool so that the union which his government in Washington represented might be preserved. Such a position has nothing to do with Christian ethics, nothing to do with evangelism, nothing to do with the eschatological promise of Christ.

In facing the choice between Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Nixon, many Americans, including many religious Americans, were secretly happy that Mr. Kennedy did not seem to see eye to eye with the Catholic hierarchy on many questions and that Mr. Nixon appeared to be an indifferent Quaker.

The converse of the conception of amoral politics lies in the doctrine of morality totally divorced from politics, a point of view which has a long history in Christianity. In *Christ and Culture* H. Richard Niebuhr analyzes no less than five patterns of relationship proposed for the church and society. Of these, the view that religion must turn its back upon the secular order is perhaps the most ancient position, with honorable antecedents, and one not difficult to root in the New Testament. This standpoint is vividly expressed by Ronald Goetz in his *Christian Century* article:

. . . It is not the task of a New Testament-conceived church to foster relative improvements in the structures of earthly authority, but to coexist in any given order, its members testifying that God intends to and is able to alleviate human misery and the merciless injustice

of this world *eschatologically* (*Italics by author*). Certainly this is not to say that the Christian does not have the obligation to dedicated service and giving, even to the point of his own impoverishment, to the poor, the suffering, the oppressed, but only to say that Christ repudiates the possibility of a Kingdom of God on earth. In this time, what God calls the church to do is to preach the resurrection and by the power of the Holy Spirit *call individual sinners to repentance*. *As for the world, let it be; God is responsible for its governance*. If it becomes an intolerable place for a Christian to live, he should rejoice for the opportunity to suffer and die, as Christ suffered and died for us. *God's theocratic experiments ended in the Old Testament*. In the New Testament no longer is salvation conceived in terms of governmental manipulation of a people in accordance with the written and deduced laws of God. (*Italics mine*)

Goetz finds the two classical passages for the interpretation of church-state relations in *Romans*, chapter 13, and, more briefly, in *I John* 2:15:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.  
If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Putting theological considerations aside for the moment, but only for the moment, it is clear that this view would abandon the secular order and the practice of politics to the naked thrust of power and would strip the self-seeking impulse of the individual and of the group of any restraint flowing from the discipline of morality. Bad as the present state of affairs would be, the future would be worse.

## The Scope of Ethics

This breach between politics and ethics can be closed. The twin doctrines of the amorality of politics and the unpolitical character of ethics have developed because of two factors.

The first is the limited conception of the meaning and the basic sources of contemporary ethics, even among our most unimpeachable authorities. A case in point is afforded by the *Encyclopaedia*

*Britannica*. The article on "Ethics," following the accepted pattern, treats the subject along strictly academic lines. Ethics is defined as "the systematic study of the nature of value-concepts and of the general principles which justify us in applying them to anything." The "good" is then defined as "what is intrinsically good, or good in itself."

This technical approach to ethics reflects the Greek view, and this conception of "the good" as "intrinsically good, or good in itself" takes no account of the Judeo-Christian concept of the good as obedience to the will of God. It is therefore quite understandable that the comprehensive article on the "History of Ethics" in the *Britannica*, which treats the subject under several headings—Greek and Roman Ethics, Medieval Ethics, and Modern Ethics—has no discussion of either Old Testament or New Testament ethics. This is all the more unfortunate since the medieval section, quite properly, surveys the effort in scholasticism to mediate between Biblical doctrine and Greek thought. As a result, the reader is left uninstructed on one of the two basic components of the medieval philosophic enterprise.

Undoubtedly, the strictly technical delimitation of ethics in the *Encyclopaedia* as a branch of philosophy is legitimate. It is equally clear that the Bible is non-speculative in character. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that the non-syllogistic form in which ethical norms are presented in Biblical thought has often misled modern students of philosophy into overlooking the theories of man and conduct which are implicit in the ethical imperatives of the Bible. These have proved infinitely more influential for the ethical conduct and aspirations of Western society than the speculations of the Stoics, the Cynics, the Cyrenaics, and the Epicureans, and even of Plato and Aristotle.

In the First Book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates, in arguing with Thrasymachus, analyzes the meaning of the concept of justice with great acuteness. That such a discussion is necessary would never occur to the prophet Micah: "He hath told thee, o man, what is good, and what the Lord Thy God does require of thee, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." (6:8) Yet it is the concept of righteousness of the Hebrew prophets as

mediated through the Judeo-Christian tradition that creates the problems and the tensions in modern society. For, to labor the obvious, the ethical system to which Western civilization gives its adherence, if often only in the form of lip-service, is what is conventionally called Christian ethics, or the ethics of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The second and more fundamental error lies in our faulty understanding of the character and limits of Biblical ethics itself. In bringing its insights to bear on the contemporary world, we have erred both in including and in excluding too much of our Biblical heritage. On the one hand, there are resources within Biblical ethics that have remained untapped, while, on the other, there are elements within the sources that have been called upon to do service where they are irrelevant and meaningless and therefore misleading. The mood of the hour, or of the moment, in contemporary religious thought and Biblical scholarship is one of disdain for "historicism" and the analysis of sources, in favor of the synthetic approach and the sloughing over of differences within the tradition for the sake of a unitary pattern. Undoubtedly the reaction against the narrow and painful atomization of the Biblical text and the violence done Biblical thought by historical criticism was overdue. But it has swung too far in the opposite direction and has thus obliterated features of the landscape that can serve as landmarks and without which we are likely to lose our way.

Actually, two major conceptions of ethics may be distinguished within the Judeo-Christian heritage. They may be called the *ethics of self-abnegation* and the *ethics of self-fulfillment*. It cannot be stressed too strongly that it is an error to equate the ethics of self-fulfillment with the Old Testament and label it the Jewish component and identify the ethics of self-abnegation with the New Testament and describe it as the Christian element within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Actually, *both concepts of ethics exist in each tradition*, though by and large what is dominant in one tends to be secondary in the other.

I believe it a useful contribution to analyze the value and relevance of both elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition for contemporary politics. It should be stressed that in rethinking its

relationship to Biblical ethics, the Christian world is not being called upon to go outside its own authentic tradition. The Western world has only to avail itself fully of the resources already available to it in its religious background in order to establish a viable ethical system by which to mould its future.

## The Ethics of Self-Abnegation

The ethics of self-abnegation is often, though inaccurately, described as “the ethics of absolute love.” It is characterized by several basic features:

1) It makes extreme demands upon human nature, including the total surrender of self-interest, as in the famous injunction, “Love your enemies.” (*Matthew* 5:44) It should, however, be added that this exalted imperative is contrasted with a norm of behavior never taught in the tradition:

Ye have heard that it hath been said,  
Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

(*Matthew* 5:43)

No scholar has ever been able to cite a passage in normative Jewish sources that preaches or even condones hating one’s enemy. The classic teaching is of quite the opposite tenor, as noted later.

2) It expresses itself in terms of emotional attitudes, extolling virtues like love and charity, rather than the promulgation of specific norms of conduct, through a system of law. In fact, it tends to decry such efforts as legalism as an impersonal and heartless approach to the problems of human relationships. Its antinomian bias, as Paul indicates, is directed not merely against the ritual elements of the law but against ethical enactments as well: “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” (*II Corinthians* 3:6)

3) The ethics of self-abnegation has also been the source of the doctrine of non-resistance to evil. It may be pointed out — a fact little known — that the New Testament teaching of “turning the other cheek” (*Matthew* 5:39) is derived from the Old Testament:

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.  
Let him put his mouth in the dust; if so be, there may  
be hope. Let him give his cheek to him that smiteth him,  
let him be filled with shame.

(*Lam.* 3:27-30)

In the Hebrew Bible, however, this behavior is described as a tragic necessity of the human situation, not as an intrinsic ideal. To be sure, non-resistance to evil has never been widely practiced, except as the policy of homogeneous and small religious minorities. Yet it must be conceded that it has been regarded by many as representing the highest ethical good. Thus it became part of the system of values of a considerable section of the Western world.

The ethics of self-abnegation counsels submission to political tyranny:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.  
For there is no power but of God:  
The powers that be are ordained of God.  
Whosoever therefore resisteth the power,  
Resisteth the ordinance of God:  
And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.  
For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.  
Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power?  
Do that which is good,  
And thou shalt have praise of the same:  
For he is the minister of God to thee for good.  
But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid:  
For he beareth not the sword in vain:  
For he is the minister of God,  
A revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.  
Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath,  
But also for conscience sake.  
For this cause pay ye tribute also:  
For they are God's ministers,  
Attending continually upon this very thing.  
Render therefore to all their dues:  
Tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom;  
Fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.  
Owe no man any thing, but to love one another:  
For he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. (*Romans* 13:1-8)

The classic utterance of Jesus, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" (*Matt.* 22:21; *Mark* 12:17; *Luke* 20:25), has been subjected to a vast amount of interpretation. It is generally taken by Christian thinkers to be normative for the relationship of church and state or, alternatively, of religion and society. Whatever other levels of meaning may be found in it, this utterance seems to be in conformity with Paul's elaboration in *Romans*, cited above, and would seem to express a willingness to accept political tyranny. It is, of course, entirely possible, indeed probable, that this was a counsel for the moment, an act of expediency dictated by the necessity of proceeding with the greater concerns which Jesus had at the fateful Passover season in Jerusalem.

The ethics of self-abnegation also urges submission to social inequality, including slavery:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

(*I Peter* 2:13,14,17,18,19,20)

Whether the counsel for wives falls under the same category may perhaps be left undecided:

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands:

(*I Peter* 3:1)

4) The ethics of self-abnegation is basically individualistic and focuses upon the individual human soul, while group-relations are ignored, either as artificial or as unimportant. The abiding value of this approach lies in its stress upon the dignity of each individual soul in the presence of God, irrespective of the accidents of time, space, and circumstance. Its weakness inheres in its failure to recognize that the national, social, economic, cultural, and racial

characteristics of men are inherent elements of their personalities which cannot be ignored if we are to address ourselves to the whole man and the total human situation. To disregard these relationships simply means to leave large areas, including those that are of critical concern today, untouched by the ethical impulse. The general failure of the church to transform the attitude of its communicants with regard to minority groups, as in the ubiquitous presence of anti-Semitism in Western society and in the tension-laden area of Negro-white relations in all parts of the United States, stems in large measure from its age-old emphasis upon the individual in the abstract and from its failure to grapple with his group-characteristics in the concrete.

5) The ascetic impulse in Paul's teaching is strikingly manifest in his negative attitude toward family relations. Many factors entered into his outlook, such as his conception, derived from the Greeks, of the dichotomy of body and soul, and his theological doctrine of the Fall of Man, which he found in the *Genesis* narrative of the Garden of Eden. Yet it should be noted that the demand for the suppression of the sexual impulse whenever possible is thoroughly compatible with the ethics of self-abnegation:

Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.

For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.

He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.

(*I Corinthians* 7:1,2,7,8,9,32,33)

Paul's opposition to divorce undoubtedly derives from more than one element in his theological outlook. Yet it is clear that the

ascetic strain in Paul's thought played a significant role in his prohibition of divorce, as is indicated by the fact that it is imbedded in the same major pronouncement on marriage. (*I Corinthians* 7:10-14, 27) In this regard, he was repeating the attitude attributed in the *Gospels* to Jesus, who opposed divorce and extolled celibacy. (*Matthew* 19:3-12) It is noteworthy that in the parallel passage in *Mark* (10:1-12) the praise of celibacy, which constitutes the closing section of Jesus' utterance in *Matthew*, is lacking.

6) Economic concerns are beyond the purview of man's highest concern. Particularly significant for understanding the ethics of self-abnegation is the counsel given to the young man who claims to have observed all the major injunctions of the Decalogue and asks how he may inherit the Kingdom of Heaven: "Sell all thou hast and give to the poor." (*Matt.* 19:21; *Mark* 10:21; 18:22; *Luke* 18:22. See also *Luke* 12:33, "Fear not...sell your possessions and give alms.") From any long-range view, such a course would simply add him to the ranks of the poor, so that he would need to become a recipient of charity himself and no benefit would accrue to society. This consideration explains the contrasting Talmudic dictum, "He who wishes to dispense his wealth to charity should not dispose of more than one-fifth of his possessions." (B. *Kethubbot* 50a)

The key to these various characteristics of the ethics of self-abnegation lies in the saying of Jesus cited in *Luke* 9:59-62:

And he said unto another, Follow me.  
But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father.  
Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead:  
But go thou and preach the kingdom of God.  
And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee;  
But let me first go and bid them farewell,  
Which are at home at my house.  
And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand  
to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

Early Christianity was permeated by a sense of imminent eschatology, the conviction that an apocalyptic disaster was about to

take place. This cataclysm would usher in the Kingdom of God, and therefore quite logically all normal, long-range human concerns became nugatory. Only an interim ethic, concerned with bringing the individual human soul into a state of perfect virtue ("If ye would be perfect"), made sense in these pregnant hours before the great Judgment about to become manifest.

This faith in an apocalyptic revolution derived from an unshakable conviction in the power and justice of God when confronted by the implacable power of Roman tyranny. Only a supernatural intervention from on high could avail to destroy the forces of evil. Every political crisis in the state was therefore seized upon by fervent believers as evidence that the dissolution of Roman tyranny was at hand. Nor was it a purely political upheaval or a national liberation that they envisaged, for they were acutely aware of social injustice and personal immorality. What they anticipated was a miraculous transformation of the world and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

This faith was not limited to the young Christian community in Palestine. It was shared by elements among the Pharisees and by several of the other Jewish sects. It was the motive power of the Essenes, who, as we now know from the *Manual of Discipline* and the other Scrolls found in the Dead Sea area, constituted not a single sect but a constellation of semi-monastic, mystical groups. By an intensive regimen of self-purification and abstinence from ordinary human concerns, the Dead Sea Sectarians were actively preparing themselves for the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. The Scroll of the *War between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* is a military manual describing the tactics to be employed in the imminent war in which victory would fluctuate between the forces of good and the forces of evil until the ultimate triumph of God's cause.

In sum, the ethics of self-abnegation arose out of an eschatological vision at a given moment in history within a group destined to exert tremendous influence upon humanity. In such a regimen, the ethics of self-abnegation can quite properly demand of its devotees the ultimate, which is a total sacrifice of self for the sake of others. Given the brief but decisive hour in history to which

it is applicable, it offers a consistent and even rational course of action for the individual. Yet the ethics of self-abnegation, be it noted, does not deny that life is a supreme good, or, in Jesus' words, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (*John* 10:10)

On the other hand, to apply the interim ethics of an eschatological vision to the permanent structure of an enduring society, or even to use it as a measuring rod of political and social action, is self-defeating. It is analogous to the practice of some isolationist groups in America who find their warrant in Washington's Farewell Address, in which he urged the thirteen new struggling states on the Atlantic seaboard, clinging precariously to their new-born independence, to avoid entangling alliances with foreign nations.

A distinguished contemporary theologian was recently asked, "What has contemporary politics to do with the Sermon on the Mount?" To this he replied, and with perfect justice, "Nothing, and it shouldn't." The same categorical negative could not, I believe, have been given to the question, "What has practical politics to do with the Ten Commandments?" For the Decalogue was proclaimed at the beginning of history; the Sermon on the Mount was believed to usher in the end of history. The former inaugurated the commencement of the significant moral activity of the people of God; the latter announced the conclusion of its group-experience in the context of the natural order.

The question of the compatibility of ethics and politics can therefore not be resolved by juxtaposing the activities and achievements of the political order and passing judgment upon them in terms of the ethical teaching in the *Gospels* or in the *Epistles* of Paul or in writings of certain medieval Jewish moralists. In none of these sources of the Western religio-ethical tradition, be it noted, is the doctrine of renunciation expounded as uncompromisingly as in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the other Hindu scriptures.

There are those who are disposed to deduce from this conclusion that the ethics of self-abnegation represents a higher level of aspiration than any alternative approach. The literature of apologetics both in Christianity and in Judaism is replete with such comparisons and contrasts. I do not regard them as either illumi-

nating or true. All that may be said is that the various ethical approaches are different, each with its own canons of meaning and relevance to the good life.

In sum, the ethics of self-abnegation cannot be fruitfully or legitimately applied to the problems confronting a viable and enduring social order. It is noteworthy that when the Christian Church turned to the task of building an ethical system to serve the needs of a permanent society, or at least one with a long-term life expectancy, it did not adopt the ethics of self-sacrifice or self-abnegation as its basis. Instead, the Catholic Church created its elaborate system of natural law, which is based upon another principle, equally rooted in the Biblical tradition and therefore equally congenial to the Christian *ethos*. This concept may be called the ethics of responsibility, or, as we prefer, the *ethics of self-fulfillment*.

## The Ethics of Self-Fulfillment

At the very outset, two *caveats* are in order. One must guard against the widespread error of equating the ethics of self-fulfillment with "the ethics of justice," unless it is recognized that justice stands in a dialectic relationship with love, as will be noted below.

Moreover, one must avoid identifying self-fulfillment with self-interest or selfishness. What is crucial is the concept of man's selfhood, which is not exhausted by the boundaries of his physical organism, its needs and appetites. Basic to the ethics of self-fulfillment is the emphasis upon the total human personality, which has a thousand invisible strands linking it to other human beings in the family, the community, the nation, the religious group, and the human race. I leave out of account in this treatment of ethics the relationship of the individual human soul to God, which, for all religious believers, both undergirds all these relationships and constitutes their capstone.

The ethics of self-fulfillment regards it not only as natural and permissible but as obligatory for every living organism to strive to maintain its life and function and to seek the maximum expres-

sion of its individuality, so long as it does not vitiate or destroy the equal and similar right of other living creatures of the same order of being. The Biblical passage, "Ye shall take good heed of yourselves" (*Deut.* 4:15), is interpreted in Rabbinic tradition as a divine injunction to protect one's life and well-being.

Obviously, there is no "iron curtain" separating the two types of ethical attitude. As a contemporary religious thinker has noted, "There is no self-fulfillment without self-abnegation and, in turn, self-abnegation is not an end in itself but must be viewed as an organic part of an ultimate life-affirming concept of man and of his existence."

Nonetheless, the difference between the two types of ethical system is real. We may cite in this connection the statement of Francis Bacon which he proposed in praise of the new dispensation, "Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament, adversity of the New." The record will demonstrate that the deprivations of the submerged groups in society were more than once justified by spokesmen of religion and of the *status quo*, on the ground that deprivations were good for their souls.

In 1829, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, nephew of the Founding Father of the same name, vigorously urged a campaign for the evangelization of the Negro in an address before the Agricultural Society of South Carolina. He based his plea on two grounds, of which the first was the criticism levelled by the "northern brethren" against the southern slave-holders who had failed to give their chattels "religious instruction." The second argument would have brought savage delight to Karl Marx's heart. Pinckney suggested that the imparting of Christianity to the Negro would tend to make a more docile, obedient, and tractable slave, adding moral suasion to statute and the lash as a control over the Negro. In this regard he said: "Nothing is better calculated to render man satisfied with his destiny in this world than a conviction that its hardships and trials are as transitory as its honors and enjoyments; and that good conduct, founded on Christian principles, will ensure superior rewards in that which is future and eternal." Of more recent vintage is the bitterly sardonic chant of the now defunct I.W.W.: "You'll eat pie, in the sky, bye and bye." On the other hand, a Hasidic

teacher was accustomed to say, "Why do you worry about my soul and your own body? Worry about my body and your own soul!"

The ethics of self-fulfillment is the source for a basic principle of Rabbinic law which declares that all the commandments may be set aside in order to save a human life except three, the prohibitions of murder, idolatry, and sexual immorality.

The two types of ethics are juxtaposed in an interesting passage in the Talmud. The hypothetical case is advanced of two men in a desert with a flask of water belonging to one of them and adequate to sustain one human life. One otherwise little-known sage, Ben Patura, suggests that they share the bottle of water so that neither may look upon his companion dying before his eyes. The famous sage, Rabbi Akiba, disagrees. He cites the Biblical verse, "Thy brother shall live *with thee*" (*Leviticus* 25:36), from which he deduces that "thy life takes precedence over the life of thy neighbor." (B. *Baba Mezia* 62a) Akiba declares that in such a tragic circumstance the owner would be morally justified in drinking the water himself, thus preserving at least one human life instead of having both of them die out of a sentimental impulse. It goes without saying that he would be free to give his bottle to his companion, out of love for him or out of the conviction that there was a greater gain in preserving the life of his companion than his own. What Akiba rejects is the idea that both lives ought to be lost, when one can be saved. On the other hand, the Talmud insists, if A threatens to kill B unless B kills C, B is forbidden to murder C to save his own life. He must be prepared to die at the hand of A, since in either event one innocent human life would be lost, and B would thus keep himself free from the crime of murder: "Who is prepared to say that your blood is redder than that of your proposed victim?" (B. *Pesahim* 25b)

To evaluate fairly the impact on life of the ethics of self-fulfillment, it is worth recalling that Akiba himself died a martyr's death during the Hadrianic persecutions. What is perhaps even more to the point, Rabbinic law declares that if a man sees his neighbor drowning in the river, or being dragged off by a wild animal, or being attacked by bandits, he is obligated to save him. In this connection, the Biblical command (*Lev.* 19:16), which I

regard as one of the most far-reaching principles of Biblical ethics, is adduced: "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy fellow-man." (B. *Sanhedrin* 73a) In the eighteen centuries since Akiba, untold men and women, seeking to live by the ethics of self-fulfillment, have died for other human beings or for the advancement of an ideal.

In sum, the ethics of self-fulfillment regards the preservation of life, which is the gift of God, as the highest good, so long as it is not achieved by the destruction of other life which is equally the creation of God and has an equal right to survival.

The relationship of the practice of martyrdom to our two conceptions of ethics would seem, at first blush, to be consistent only with the ethics of self-abnegation, of which it would be the highest manifestation. But while the martyr may be actuated by this ideal, the justification for this act is to be sought in the ethics of self-fulfillment. For it flows out of the individual's conviction that his self-sacrifice will ultimately redound to the enhancement of life for the commonalty. The martyr, as its Greek etymology indicates, is a witness. By his heroic sacrifice, he hopes to testify to the truth by which he lives, or help advance the ideal to which he is dedicated, or express his love for a being outside himself, be it in heaven or on earth. In a word, he loses his life to preserve what is for him the quintessence of life.

Hence, the lofty ideal of individual martyrdom cannot be transposed into a justification for the voluntary self-immolation of a nation. It is at the furthest possible remove from genocide, the forcible liquidation of an entire society, because such an act of mass destruction would have no beneficial effect upon the remainder of humanity. Quite the contrary, it would impoverish the survivors of the human race and brutalize the perpetrators.

The ethics of self-fulfillment is marked by several other outstanding characteristics:

1) It favors the formulation of concrete principles of conduct rather than of abstract emotional attitudes:

If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray,  
Thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.

If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under its burden,  
Thou shalt forbear to pass by him; thou shalt surely release  
it with him.

(*Exod.* 23:4,5)

and

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart;  
Thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbor . . .  
Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge  
against the children of thy people.  
But thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;  
I am the Lord.

(*Lev.* 19:17,18)

and

If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat,  
If he be thirsty, give him water to drink;  
For thou wilt heap coals of fire on his head;  
And the Lord will reward thee.

(*Prov.* 25:21,22)

The Golden Rule, enunciated in the Holiness Code in *Leviticus* (19:18) and cited by Jesus as well as by Akiba as the highest ethical commandment, has overshadowed two other imperatives in the same chapter which are perhaps ethically more fruitful because they are concrete in their application:

The first is concerned with the protection of the weaker groups in society, who differ from the dominant majority and who in the ancient world were even more defenseless than are aliens in the contemporary world:

And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land,  
Ye shall not vex him.  
But the stranger that dwelleth with you  
Shall be unto you as one born among you,  
And thou shalt love him as thyself;  
For ye were strangers in the land of Egypt:  
I am the Lord your God.

(*Lev.* 19:33,34)

As for the second, Scott Buchanan has recently stressed the truth that each individual is directly responsible for injustice anywhere

in the universe and has traced it to Tolstoi, Dostoievski, and Gandhi. He could have cited it from *Lev.* 19:16, a passage we have already quoted: "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy fellow-man." Here the sin of permission is placed on a par with the sins of commission and omission that are set forth in the Holiness Code, the Decalogue, and elsewhere in Biblical ethics.

2) The ethics of self-fulfillment also stresses the importance of the act rather than the motive. Conscious though it be that motives constitute the matrix of deeds, it is unwilling to regard intention as more important than execution. It believes that the right act will ultimately engender the right attitude, a kind of unsophisticated version of the James-Lange theory of the emotions. The Talmudic principle is, "A man should perform a righteous deed, even if he does so only for ulterior motives, because he will thus learn to do the right for its own sake (*lishmah*)."

 (B. *Pesahim* 50b)

3) Because of its concern with a perdurable society, rather than with a brief interim period, this ethical approach is conscious of the obligations owing to all men everywhere, and not merely to those with whom the individual comes into direct contact. Hence, the ethics of self-fulfillment tends to stress justice rather than love as the basic attitude in human relations.

Yet it is far from ignoring love as the highest motive in human conduct. On the contrary, love is an integral element in the ethics of self-fulfillment, which is to be conceived of not as a point but as an arc, the lower end of which is justice, representing the minimum standards in man's relationship to his fellows, and the upper end of which is love, the ideal goal toward which men are to strive. Yet, like most analogies, this is not completely satisfactory, because the relationship of justice to love is not quantitative, a matter of less and more, but dialectic. Justice and love are perpetually in tension with one another, each virtue safeguarding the other by preventing it from degenerating into its counterfeit, a peril to which it is liable if held in isolation. For justice without love is vengefulness; love without justice, sentimentality. Justice without love denies the principle of moral freedom by robbing men of the capacity for regeneration; love without justice negates the princi-

ple of law in the world, by pretending that men can escape the consequences of their actions. Thus both justice and love, standing in creative tension with each other, are essential to human ethics. The conviction of religion that they are rooted in the universe is dramatically expressed by the Rabbinic tradition that God himself occupies two thrones, the seat of justice and the seat of mercy, when He judges His creatures.

Contrary to a general impression, the Golden Rule does not express the teaching of self-abnegation but the doctrine of self-fulfillment. As some ethical teachers have acutely noted, it does not command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor *more* than thyself," but presupposes the love of one's self as a prerequisite and as a standard for the love of one's neighbor. Erich Fromm has emphasized the error involved in equating love of self with selfishness: "The assumption . . . is that to love others is a virtue, to love oneself is a sin. Furthermore, love for others and love for oneself are mutually exclusive. Theoretically, we meet here with a fallacy concerning the nature of love. Love is not primarily 'caused' by a specific object, but is a lingering quality in a person which is only actualized by a certain object. . . . From this it follows that my own self, in principle, is as much an object of my love as another person. The affirmation of my own life, happiness, growth, freedom, is rooted in the presence of the basic readiness of an ability for such an affirmation. If an individual has this readiness, he has it also toward himself; if he can only 'love' others, he cannot love at all. . . . Selfishness is rooted in this very lack of fondness for oneself. The person who is not fond of himself, who does not approve of himself, is in constant anxiety concerning his own self."

This insight of a modern psychologist was anticipated by the intuition of the fifteenth-century mystic, Nicholas of Cusa: "I love my life supremely, because Thou art my life's sweetness. For if I ought to love myself in Thee who art my likeness, I am most especially constrained thereto, when I see that Thou lovest me as Thy creature and Thine image."

4) The ethics of self-fulfillment, being concerned with the total human personality in the context of a functioning society, is acutely

conscious of the group-relations of men. It is not satisfied to urge love of one's fellow-men in the abstract but demands justice before the law and compassion beyond the law for the underprivileged and the unprotected, the widow, the orphan, the alien, the landless sharecropper. It is concerned with the legitimacy of other national groups, a principle which it keeps in creative tension with its universalistic bias, which flows out of its preoccupation, or, if you will, its obsession, with the principle of unity.

5) Moreover, only the ethics of self-fulfillment, which is life-affirming, affords a rational basis for regarding oppression as immoral. Political tyranny and economic exploitation, physical and intellectual slavery, are all instruments for suppressing or minimizing the self-hood of their victims, and depriving them of their share of the blessings of this world. Obviously, these manifestations are evil only if we believe that the preservation of the self and the fullest expression of human personality, including the enjoyment of the world, are ultimate goods.

6) The Biblical ethics of self-fulfillment seeks everywhere the principle of unity which derives from the passionate Hebraic commitment to the uncompromising unity of God.

Perhaps the most concrete embodiment of this principle lies in the doctrine of the unity and equality of mankind, which was first explicitly proclaimed by Amos, though it is implicit in *Genesis*. Thus, the Midrash reports a discussion among the Rabbis as to the most fundamental passage in Scripture. While Rabbi Akiba cited the Golden Rule in *Leviticus* (19:18), Ben Azzai quoted *Genesis* 5:1, "This is the book of the generations of Adam, in the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him," a passage which emphasizes the unity of all men who share a common origin, as well as their equal dignity as fashioned in the Divine Image. (*Sifra, Kedoshim* 4:15)

The *Book of Job* gives cosmic expression to another aspect of this quest for unity, by its faith that there can be no dichotomy between the natural and the moral orders, because the moral order is rooted in the universe and the natural order is the matrix of morality. This conviction of the Hebraic tradition has con-

sequences both for the world and for man. First, it implies that ours is a law-abiding universe, not merely with regard to the physical laws disclosed by science but with regard to the law of righteousness which the Prophets saw as operating in the world and validated by the realities of existence. Second, morality does not mean "doing what comes naturally." It means that obedience to the moral law does not require doing violence to human nature by suppressing human impulses or appetites; it requires, rather, that men discipline and channel their impulses and make them instruments for the service of God, sanctifying them through obedience to the divine imperative. This leads directly to the Hebraic conception of the unity underlying all elements of human experience. John MacMurray has written: "The Hebrew form of thought rebels against the very idea of a distinction between the secular and the religious aspects of life." This acute observation does not go far enough. Authentic Hebrew thought does not merely rebel against the dichotomy; it does not recognize its existence.

Hence, the ethics of self-fulfillment finds no inherent line of demarcation between the material and the spiritual needs of man's nature and, consequently, between a temporal and a spiritual order in society. It therefore follows that there is no wall of separation between politics and ethics in theory, nor can any be permanently countenanced in practice. The world is the handiwork of a righteous God who is both its Creator and its Governor. What is right must somehow prove practical and what is practical must conform to the right.

Only the ethics of self-fulfillment, as we have sought to delineate it here, can serve as the basis of a collective ethic, of a moral approach to politics, because it alone can supply a rational basis for conduct *vis-à-vis* individuals outside the range of one's personal experience, where the minimum norm of justice and not the maximum standard of love can be meaningfully invoked. In the mutual relations of group-aggregations, like nations or blocs of nations, only the ethics of self-fulfillment, of self-preservation within the framework of regard for the equal rights of others, can serve the needs of the political process.

# The Contribution of Wisdom

This insistence upon the compatibility of politics and ethics may seem naive and highly unrealistic, particularly in an age when *Realpolitik* is practiced on a global scale and is reaching out to cosmic space as well. But such a conclusion is based upon a failure to grasp the full scope of Biblical ethics, which is largely derived from the Prophets but is not exhausted by them. The Biblical canon includes not only Law and Prophecy but a third current of great importance, Wisdom teaching.

A word is in order with regard to the structure and content of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three main sections. The first of these is *Torah*, generally rendered “*The Law*” but more accurately rendered “teaching” or “guidance.” These five Books of Moses, containing the most ancient traditions of the Hebrew nation and its basic ritual, civil, criminal, and medical law, constituted the special province of the priests, who were not only the officiants of the Temple and the custodians of its traditions but also the judges and the medical officers of ancient Israel. Their authority as custodians and interpreters of the Torah derived from the Revelation of the Lord to Moses and the Israelites at Sinai, as in the recurrent formula in the *Pentateuch*: “And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying.”

The second element in the tri-partite division of Scripture was that of the Prophets, who claimed to be the “spokesmen of God,” the recipients of His direct immediate communication, declaring, “Thus saith the Lord.” In His name they castigated the evils of their day and held fast to the conviction of a Golden Age which lay not in the distant past, as the ancients believed, but in the future, “the end of days,” when the Kingdom of God would inevitably be ushered in on earth.

The third current in the spiritual life of ancient Israel was that represented by Wisdom, or *Hokmah*. Biblical *Hokmah* embraced far more than the ultimate wisdom of life. It began on a much less exalted plane, incidentally paralleling that of Hellenic *Sophia*, from which post-Socratic Greek philosophy arose and against

which it was a protest. Basically Hebrew Wisdom, which was a branch of ancient Oriental Wisdom, represented all the practical skills and technical arts of civilization. In Biblical Hebrew, the term *Hokmah* therefore included the arts of the statesman and the military leader, the artist, the musician and the poet, the singer, the interpreter of dreams, the sailor, the craftsman, the architect, the soothsayer, and, in later Hebrew, the midwife.<sup>1</sup> It also included the inculcation of all the virtues that make for practical success in business affairs, in one's relationship to wife and children, and in the attitude toward one's peers and superiors.

The Sages or teachers of Wisdom tended at times to envy the high pretensions of the priests to be the custodians of the *Torah* revealed to Moses and the even more passionate claims of the Prophets to be the immediate recipients of divine communication. Some of the Wisdom writers therefore sought at times to hypostatize Wisdom into a supernal figure,<sup>2</sup> who guided the creation of the cosmos and was the Divine *fons et origo* of their own activity.

Generally, however, Wisdom teachers made no claim to supernatural illumination. Their authority and power to convince derived from the accuracy of their observation of life and the logical deductions they based upon it. Most of these Wisdom teachers were occupied in applying careful observation and logical deduction to the practical concerns of life and in teaching the practical virtues that made for success to the young men who were their pupils in the academies. Incidentally, the Wisdom teachers either emanated from or ministered to the upper classes of society. They therefore reflected the religious, social, and ethical attitudes and biases of those who find life tolerable here

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<sup>1</sup>See Liddell-Scott, *Greek Lexicon* (s.v. *Sophia*, *Sophistes*) for the variety of meanings in Greek literature and thought, and R. Gordis, *Kohleth—The Man and His World* (New York, 1951), Chap. I-III, for a survey of the content of Oriental and Hebrew Wisdom, esp. p. 17 and notes.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Proverbs* 8:21-32; *Ben Sira*, Chap. 1:1-18; *Wisdom of Solomon*, 7:15-8:1; 10:1 ff.

and now.<sup>3</sup> The most conservative utterance in the Hebrew Bible occurs in the *Book of Proverbs*:

My son, fear thou the Lord and the king  
And meddle not with them that are given to change.

(24:21)

Among these Wisdom teachers were a few highly sensitive spirits who were concerned with the fundamental issues of life, the goal of existence, the nature of suffering, the character of death, the meaning of truth, and God's will for man. Being accustomed to logical demonstration, they were congenitally incapable of taking on faith the confident assurance either of the Prophet that he spoke the will of God or of the priest who declared that he was interpreting it as embodied in the *Torah* of Moses. They preferred to approach these perennial issues with the same instruments of observation and reason that they utilized in their more mundane activities.

Unfortunately for these Wisdom teachers, these tools did not succeed in supplying the answers. Some of them ended in skepticism and despair, notably Ecclesiastes, who found no other good for man except the enjoyment of life, since truth, like justice, was forever denied to man. The author of *Job* agonized over the problem of suffering and injustice in a world created by God. He finally achieved a level of faith which is probably the ultimate level of insight possible to man.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, Biblical Wisdom falls into two main categories, which have their parallels, though on a far less profound level, in all branches of Oriental wisdom, Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Ugaritic:

The lower Wisdom, practical, non-speculative, conventional, concerned with bringing to its wards the maximum success in

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<sup>3</sup>See R. Gordis, "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1944, Vol. 18, pp. 77-116.

<sup>4</sup>See R. Gordis, "The Bible as a Cultural Monument," in *The Jews*, edited by Louis Finkelstein (3rd edition, New York, 1960), pp. 783-822. In addition to *Kohleleth—The Man and His World*, cited above, a detailed study of *Job*, its text, structure, and meaning, is in preparation.

their careers in business, society, and the family. Its chief literary deposits are the *Books of Proverbs* and the Apocryphal *Ben Sira*.

The higher Wisdom, speculative, unconventional, concerned with the ultimates of human existence, the major products of which are *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* in the Bible and the *Wisdom of Solomon* in the Apocrypha.

Before we revert to our basic theme, it should be pointed out that the three elements of Biblical thought—the Law, Prophets, and Wisdom—were by no means hermetically sealed from one another but on the contrary interacted upon and fructified each other.

## Two Hidden Virtues

Generally, the lower practical Wisdom has been looked upon with varying degrees of condescension as being unduly concerned with material ends of limited value. Hence, its unique contribution to the content of Biblical ethics has been overlooked. This contribution lies in its emphasis upon realism as a virtue and upon intelligence as constituting obedience to the will of God. For the Wisdom writers, notably the authors of *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Ben Sira*, the fool is a sinner and the violation of the moral law is folly as well as transgression. From this identification two corollaries follow: a course of action, however practical it may seem at the outset, if it violates the canons of morality, is doomed to failure; and, conversely, a course of action, however high-minded its aims, if it be impractical, is likewise unacceptable, because neither can genuinely advance human well-being.

Closely related to the quality of intelligence is the virtue of honesty. We should do well to recall Samuel Johnson's demand, "Clear your mind of cant," echoed in Carlyle's warning, "Until cant cease, nothing else can begin." When this insight is kept in mind, it is clear that several of the besetting sources of failure in international affairs, which are frequently cited as proof that ethics is irrelevant to politics, are actually illustrations of the opposite. Thus *legalism*, which has been defined as "an approach

to politics which invests in legal symbols, documents, and structures a power and authority which they do not in fact possess," does not fail because of an excess of ethics but because of a deficiency of ethics, the lack of intelligence. So, too, *moralism*, the constant invoking of high-sounding principles in carrying out national policy, often fails, but again not because of an excess, but through a deficiency, in morality. To put the matter succinctly, moralism is morality minus intelligence or honesty or both.

Thus, intelligence teaches what experience exemplifies—the human situation will often pose a plurality of opposing goals and ends which need to be adjusted to one another. But the existence of a contradiction between two ideals is not a denial of their inherent validity. Nor is it an inherent "evil" in the world or in human nature when men seek to establish a hierarchy of values among their goals in order to retain as much as possible of each good. To cite one instance from American history: When Abraham Lincoln declared, "If I can save the Union by abolishing slavery, I shall abolish slavery, but I shall save the Union," there was no ethical flaw in his position, merely because he did not seek to achieve all ideal ends simultaneously. The destruction of the Federal Union, which was already in existence, would have been an ethical retreat; on the other hand, the retention of slavery, which was likewise in existence, would have marked simply the failure or the postponement of an ethical advance. In establishing a scale of priorities in his goals, Lincoln demonstrated that intelligence is one of the most important of ethical virtues.

One of the most useful insights of religion is the recognition that all human action takes place in a world in which both determinism and free will operate, and, indeed, are in perpetual tension with one another. Since this interaction holds true of the individual in his day-to-day activities as well as in the decisions of nations, there is no reason to see in this trait any evidence that individual morality differs from the group-activity which is politics. If politics, the art of the possible, can never, or almost never, represent total and uncompromising adherence to ethical standards but must reckon with the stubborn data of the environment, which are determined and beyond the control of the

actors, it is not on that account different from the application of the principles of morality to the life of the individual.

There were no more uncompromising advocates of the moral law than the Hebrew prophets, yet they would never have said *fiat justitia, ruat coelum*, "let justice be done, though the heavens fall." On the contrary, they would have maintained, "let justice be done, *or* the heavens will fall." But Biblical ethics is not synonymous with prophetic ethics. It is prophetic morality chastened by the attributes of intelligence and realism, as exemplified by the Hebrew teachers of Wisdom.

William Lee Miller points out that a long catena of observers of American life, "from DeTocqueville through Bryce, Siegfried and others, down to such recent studies as those of Vernon L. Parrington, Margaret Mead, Gunnar Myrdal, and Harold Laski, have agreed on at least one point: Americans tend to 'see the world in moral terms.'" He cites Margaret Mead's comment on the national character of the United States:

As America has a moral culture—that is, a culture which accepts right and wrong as important—any discussion of Americans must simply bristle with words like *good* and *bad*. Any discussion of Samoans would bristle with terms for awkward and graceful. . . . If I were writing about the way in which the Germans or the Japanese, the Burmese or the Javanese, would have to act if they were to win the war, I would not need to use so many moral terms. For none of these peoples think of life in habitually moral terms as do Americans.

The criticism leveled against this mode of seeing the world is justified only if we define ethics as "voluntary, individual, and moral"—that is to say, in terms of the ethics of self-abnegation, which is irrelevant. When the correct frame of reference of Judeo-Christian ethics is employed, excluding what is irrelevant and including what is essential, as I have tried to suggest, there is no better category than that of right and wrong to be applied to the life either of the individual or of society, whether in domestic affairs or in international politics.

The Suez episode and the American role in the debacle of the Anglo-French *démarche* are often exhibited as an instance of

the incompatibility of ethics and politics. The practical consequences of American intervention were the ascendancy of Nasser and the penetration of Soviet influence into the Middle East, a major setback for Western policy from which we may never recover. But the high-sounding formulas invoked at the time by Secretary Dulles were not an instance of morality but of moralism, for our approach was lacking in the cardinal virtues of intelligence and honesty. The seizure of the Suez Canal and the confiscation of Israeli or Israel-bound shipping in its area constituted grave, unilateral violations by Egypt of international commitments under the Convention of 1888, which took place prior to the intervention of France, Britain, and Israel. It may be argued plausibly that had the Western powers seized the Suez Canal and then referred its disposition to an international tribunal, not merely politics, but ethics, would have been better served.

The same quality of intelligence offers the clue to a distinction all too often ignored in our day—that between expediency and prudence. *Expediency* may be defined as the temporary suspension of a moral principle because of the demands of necessity. *Prudence* is the reconciliation of two valid moral principles, which under given circumstances stand in conflict with each other. Both expediency and prudence have their place in ethically motivated international affairs. It is, however, a fatal flaw to fail to recognize the difference. What is merely expedient should be modified as soon as possible. A prudential policy may remain valid for a considerable period or even permanently.

## The Atomic Threat

The crucial problem confronting international affairs today is the establishment of conditions of peaceful relations with the Communist world, in order to eliminate the peril of atomic warfare. The meaning of nuclear destruction today has been succinctly described, without exaggeration but in awesome and realistic terms, by Harrison Brown and James Real in "Community of

Fear.”<sup>5</sup> The capacity to wipe out most of the human race and virtually all the painfully achieved products of civilization is omnipresent and real. In spite of all efforts to avert our gaze from facing the issue, the basic question of the age remains: How is this menace to be averted?

A widespread view, which is far more evident in national policy than in theoretical discussion, is that we are helplessly caught in the grip of inevitable circumstances, and that therefore the arms race should continue with unabated energy, if possible with increased expenditures. The assumption, or, more correctly, the hope, is that if we remain “strong,” our foes will be deterred from entering into armed conflict with us. While this viewpoint has been dominant in our government, it is clear that it is ethically untenable. Indeed, the doctrine of man’s being caught in a vise from which there is no escape runs counter to the fundamentals of any ethical system. For all ethics rests upon the conviction that man is a free and responsible agent, who is able in significant measure to determine his own destiny.

Moreover, this view of an accelerated arms race as the only course of action open to the free world reflects another ethical drawback — it rests upon the absence of the cardinal virtue of intelligence. That awesome methods of punishment act as a deterrent to malefactors is a notion exploded in the fields of both criminology and history. Capital punishment has never reduced murder. As for war, when Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, he confidently proclaimed that war had now been made so horrible that it was unthinkable any longer. All that remains of that generous illusion is the Nobel Peace Prize, which, in certain years, has no recipients. Atomic bombs and missiles serve only to suggest to certain mentalities that “we must do unto the other fellow as he would do to us, but do it first.” Greater than the danger of calculated war, consciously entered into by responsible government leaders on either side, is the peril of an accidental or minor incident which can plunge the world into war and chaos. That the arms race represents an intolerable drain upon the economic resources of the antagonists, which could well be used for far

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<sup>5</sup>Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions pamphlet.

more constructive purposes, is of great practical moment. This consideration is, however, secondary to the ethical issues involved.

A more sophisticated defense of the "arms race" is also proposed. In this version, it is argued that under certain circumstances nuclear war for all its risks and horrors is the only ethical course of action open to us, since there may be no other way of preserving the spiritual values of our civilization. We have no alternative but to echo the words of the Biblical Samson in his final hour, "May my soul perish with the Philistines!" This position may be disputed on practical grounds. My concern here is to evaluate it in ethical terms. Basically, I believe that it makes an error to which proponents of the ethics of self-abnegation are liable, though they need not be. It transfers the ethical values of individual martyrdom, which ministers to the advancement of human life, to the condition of the total group, where mass-murder or mass-suicide would spell not the enhancement of life but its total dissolution.

At the other extreme of the spectrum are those who advance the idea of unilateral disarmament by the United States. Painfully aware of the dangers of the present arms race and conscious of the unspeakable horrors of atomic destruction, many of the advocates of this position would admit that our Russian adversaries might well take advantage of the military superiority that would accrue to them by such a step on our part. Nonetheless, the advocates of unilateral disarmament would insist, such a risk is better than that of total annihilation. Now if the Communist bloc were to seize global hegemony without a war, it would of course mean the physical preservation of the Western world. But the price would be high—its spiritual asphyxiation, the rapid decay and death of the religious, ethical, and cultural values which Western man has historically regarded as the core of his being. While unilateral disarmament is generally defended on survivalist terms as "practical," it represents an extreme form of the ethics of self-abnegation.

It is true that at times the tactics of passive resistance as taught by Gandhi are cited to demonstrate the applicability of non-resistance to evil in world affairs, a collectivized version of the

doctrine that the individual is not to resist evil but meet it with good. It is not necessary to point out in detail that there is no analogy here, either in the character of the antagonists or in the nature of the struggle, or in the extent of the prize of victory in this battle for the world.

The ethics of self-fulfillment would seek a greater measure of survival than is likely to be afforded by unilateral disarmament, by seeking the preservation not merely of the physical life of Western man but of the values that constitute his personality. Since intelligence is a cardinal virtue in this system of ethics, it would urge taking a lesser risk than is involved either in the unrestricted arms race on the one hand or in unilateral disarmament on the other. The only ethical and realistic course is a serious, energetic, and unremitting effort by both antagonists to negotiate early mutual disarmament. It is true that negotiations have been carried on over an extended period of time by Soviet and American experts in Geneva. Rightly or wrongly, the impression is general among nations outside our orbit that we have been dragging our feet and have not recognized the desperate urgency of achieving an agreement. It is to be hoped that the new administration in Washington will take energetic steps to achieve speedy and meaningful disarmament by mutual agreement.

## The Ethics of Negotiation

In seeking to find a *modus vivendi* with the Russians, we shall not be yielding simply to expediency. The possibility for success in East-West negotiations still remains, because, however tragically limited in scope our common objectives may be, there still remains a body of ideas, desires, and hopes on which both we and they are in agreement. There is, first and foremost, the desire by both antagonists to survive, and to avoid annihilation or even massive destruction through atomic warfare.

There is also the conviction, held on both sides of the Iron Curtain, that the value of any given society lies in the degree

to which the masses of men are freed from the ravages of hunger, disease, and ignorance, though we differ with the Communists fundamentally on the value we set upon liberty and the degree to which we are prepared to surrender some stability for the sake of the free play of men's intelligence and will. We also share with our opponents a concern for the advancement of science, literature, music, and art, though here too our stress upon the freedom of the individual allows for a far greater measure of experimentation and variety. Be this as it may, there is sufficient ground for common discourse, and therefore a measure of hope still exists. It should be possible to achieve a measure of agreement on disarmament, and to limit the conflict between East and West to peaceful competition in the areas of economic and technical aid to underdeveloped areas and in cultural penetration everywhere in the world.

Some students of foreign affairs have gone further and spelled out other and more specific bases for possible agreement. Thus, C. L. Sulzberger has proposed three objectives for a "brush-fire peace" which he feels are attainable (*New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1960). These are: a) reducing tension on such issues as the non-transference of nuclear arms to non-atomic states and freedom of outer space, b) agreeing to a temporary *status quo* on currently insoluble issues, including reform of the UN, until soluble ones are settled, and c) concentrating on the improvement of the economy and the educational system of our country and those of our allies, and studying projects to eliminate world hunger.

Whether we regard these or other objectives as constituting a basis for discussion and ultimate agreement is secondary to the recognition that such common objectives exist and must be found. Moreover, we shall be able to approach the agonizing and frustrating task of negotiation with our enemies with more patience and fewer moralistic pretensions if we endow our foreign policy with the qualities of honesty and intelligence. We shall then recognize that we are far from having fully solved such basic issues as race relations, the proper distribution of wealth, the providing of opportunity for education and self-fulfillment for

all under our system of democratic capitalism. Quite properly, we believe that democracy possesses two unique qualities fatally lacking in communism, the inherent capacity for peaceful change and progress and the structure for the free exercise of the will and intelligence of the people in determining its destiny. But our own unfinished business at home should make it easier for us to meet with our opponents, who are even further from fulfilling their massive goals than are we from ours.

The conclusion may be set forth briefly. To permit politics and ethics to be divorced from one another is fatal to the future of society. It may simplify the task of the religious believer who wishes to wrap himself in the mantle of piety and mystic contemplation and turn his back on the world. It may ease the task of the cynical manipulator of the political process by freeing him from any moral check or discipline. But the basic insight of the Biblical world view remains true—a society divorced from morality must perish. In the words of the Old Testament, “Where there is no vision, the people perish, but he who observes the Law, happy is he” (*Prov.* 29:18) and “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is the shame of peoples.” (*Prov.* 14:34) In the words of the New Testament, “The wages of sin is death.” (*Romans* 6:23) Always politics and ethics may seem to diverge, but it is the task of the leaders and the citizenry of the free society to strive perpetually to bring them into harmony. In the words of the *Talmud* (*Aboth* 2:16), “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither have you the right to desist from it.”

*April 1961*

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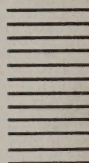
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